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UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

FRANK O'HARA'S POETRY OF DESIRE

BY

MICHAEL GELFAND

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

Edmonton, Alberta

Spring 1994

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FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled Frank O'Hara's Poetry of Desire submitted by Michael Gelfand in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

Bert Almon

Douglas Barbour

John Oster

Date 18 April 1994

For L.A., for S.E., for B.F.

Let's take a walk , you
and I in spite of the
weather if it rains hard
on our toes

we'll stroll like poodles
and be washed down a
gigantic scenic gutter
that will be

exciting!

Frank O'Hara, "Poem"

Abstract

In "Personism: A Manifesto" Frank O'Hara writes of his desire for the poem to sit between "two people instead of two pages". This study of Frank O'Hara's poetry recognizes this desire and attempts to understand the relationship between the author and the reader in the poems.

O'Hara's desire becomes complicated in the context of Roland Barthes' essay "The Death of the Author". Barthes petitions for the removal of the author, the erasure of this figure as a site of authority. Consequently, any attempt to reconcile O'Hara's poetry and Barthes' theory reveals a point of tension. If we are to embrace this however, it proves doubly rewarding. First, it is possible to discover how Barthes' essay can be re-evaluated so as to provide a strategy for approaching a text where the figure of the author must be a considered presence. Second, by applying this strategy to O'Hara's poetry, it is possible to penetrate the poetry in a way that unearths the construction of its desire.

Writing as the construction of desire becomes a concern for Barthes, later, in The Pleasure of the Text. Here Barthes reconsiders "The Death of the Author" and reveals at the text can be a site of mutual possession by the reader and the author.

This study is concerned with the way that O'Hara's

poetry responds when it is considered in the realm of Barthes' two works. O'Hara's capacity for both presence and absence as an author forms the basis for this examination. Chapter one establishes the premises for this discussion. Chapter two examines the way that O'Hara's authorial presence resonates. Chapter three considers O'Hara's potential to disappear from the poems. The final chapter considers presence and absence together and examines how they provide a way of understanding The Pleasure of the Text. In this final chapter, O'Hara's poem "In Memory of My Feelings" is examined in depth.

Acknowledgement

For his suggestions, his time, his patience, I thank my supervisor, Bert Almon.

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Abbreviations

Throughout this thesis, the following abbreviations will be used in citing works by Frank O'Hara:

CP The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara. Ed. Donald Allen. New York: Knopf, 1971.

LP Lunch Poems. San Francisco: City Lights, 1964.

JP Jackson Pollock. New York: George Braziller, 1959.

Chapter 1

Premises: From Death To Desire

It is reassuring, after reading Frank O'Hara's Lunch Poems, to come across this line from O'Hara's "Statement for The New American Poetry": "What is happening to me, save for lies and exaggerations which I try to avoid, goes into my poems" (CP 500). Such reassurance is unnecessary, but it is valuable in that it establishes the honesty - the credibility - of the author. O'Hara's poetry contains so much trivial personal information that the character of the author demands the reader's concern. At times, it seems that O'Hara's poetry contains little else but the figure of the author as he documents his thoughts and perceptions spontaneously and immediately. So, it is reassuring to know that the shadow that falls across the pages is indeed the true character of the author and not a figure posturing in the lines of verse. It is reassuring to know that this figure is expressing what is happening to him in as honest a fashion as he is able. Such reassurance is a valuable accompaniment to poetry as personal as O'Hara's.

In "The Death of the Author" Roland Barthes writes that "to assign an Author to a text is to impose a break on it, to furnish it with a final signified, to close writing". Barthes argues that readers have been consumed for too long

with a desire to know about the person who has written the text, "his history, his tastes, his passions". Such desires exhaust the text, Barthes argues, they are linked to a mistaken desire to "decipher" the text. One who wishes to decipher the text assumes that that text has only one meaning, but as Barthes states

> We know now that a text consists not of a line of words, releasing a single "theological" meaning (the "message" of the Author-God), but of a multi-dimensional space in which are married and contested several writings. . . . (53)

Reading must strive to "disentangle" a text "in all its reprises, all its stages". Reading must continually open up the text, it must never close it off. When a text is read it is activated and its reader emerges as the active and creative force. Finally, Barthes argues, the centre of the text resides with the reader and not the Author. Attempting to find the Author in the text cannot lead to its centre as "the unity of a text is not in its origin but in its destination".

When we approach Frank O'Hara's Lunch Poems with "The Death of the Author" in mind the effect is halting. The role of the biographic which Barthes clearly refutes is paramount in O'Hara's poetry. O'Hara writes about himself continuously; his perceptions, his actions, his thoughts. No detail of O'Hara's life is considered too small or

trivial to be included in a poem. No event is too unimportant to find a place in the writing. There is a certain kitchen sink aesthetic at work as O'Hara makes room for everything that he sees, thinks, feels, and does. In O'Hara's poetic universe the very writing of a poem is considered an event in itself and any external occasion - a luncheon date, the Chinese New Year, a glimpsed newspaper headline - is merely incidental. It would be a mistake to confuse these events with O'Hara's real subject matter. Regardless of the day or the occasion O'Hara writes about himself. "I am mainly pre-occupied with the world as I experience it. . ." (CP 500), O'Hara writes in his "Statement for The New American Poetry". Any confrontation with Lunch Poems confirms this remark.

Poetry concerned with such blatant personal expression makes it hard to imagine the centre of the poems residing anywhere but with the figure of the "I" who speaks. O'Hara's verse continually asserts that even the most banal personal experiences are the blocks from which poetry is made. Kenneth Koch writes:

> Something about Frank that impressed me. . . was his feeling that the silliest idea actually in his head was better than the most profound idea actually in somebody else's head. . . . (Homage 26)

Blessed with not only a poetic ability but also a poetic self-conception, O'Hara appears like a self-appointed

Shelleyian model who is confident in his possession of a great mind, a strong imagination, and an "electric life". This confidence must surely be regarded as the pilot light of inspiration for the poems.

Any author who writes of himself must possess a large measure of this confidence. What is striking in O'Hara's poetry, however, is the extent to which he is undiscerning in the information he chooses to include. Unlike other vanguard poets whose work was showcased in Donald Allen's anthology The New American Poetry 1945-1960, such as Allen Ginsberg, Charles Olson, or LeRoi Jones, O'Hara writes a poetry that is without an ideological agenda of any kind. As Glenn O'Brien writes:

> Its casual directness and unapologetic ebullience undercut[s] millennia of pedagogical solemnity, and [makes] other poetry - including that of his Beat and Black Mountain contemporaries - seem pompous and portentous by comparison (22).

What resonates in O'Hara's poetry is the character of the author and his consciousness as he is immersed in the stream of life. The effect is one of pure autobiography: "It happened, it went like this, it's over" (Vendler 238).

Marjorie Perloff, in Frank O'Hara: Poet Among Painters, argues that O'Hara's poetry is able to attain this effect of autobiography because there is no division between how the poet lived and how the poet wrote:

> Poetry and life - O'Hara refused - at least consciously, to make a distinction between the two. He regarded both as part of the same vital process. (117)

O'Hara's poems always contain this resounding sense of process. They aim to capture motion - both physical and mental - as it is occurring. The poems are instantaneous and often fragmented, and they refuse to pause or clarify themselves for anyone or anything. "I don't think my experiences are clarified or made beautiful for myself or anyone else" (CP 500) O'Hara writes of his poems in his "Statement For The New American Poetry". Of the writing process, O'Hara explains his method in the mock (yet revealing) manifesto "Personism":

> You just go on your nerve. If someone's chasing you down the street with a knife you just run, you don't turn around and shout, "Give it up! I was a track star for Mineola Prep." (CP 498)

O'Hara wishes to write without stopping to explain himself or his intentions. Consequently, the poems often seem full of the writer's person, full of his mind and observational qualities, yet they prove continually confounding in the way that they elude any quest for meaning.

Consider these lines from O'Hara's aptly titled "Personal Poem":

> I walk through the luminous humidity
> passing the House of Seagram with its wet

and its loungers and the construction to
the left that closed the sidewalk if
I ever get to be a construction worker
I'd like to have a silver hat please
and get to Moriarty's where I wait for
LeRoi. . . . (LP 33)

The poem is unrepentant in its expression of subjective vision. The poet-speaker records the subjectively viewed moment as it unfolds, while always keeping the "I" at the centre of the poem. Moreover, there is a blurring of the lines between what constitutes living and what constitutes artistic inspiration. Superficially, the poem feels Romantic because it turns life into art while making the art itself autobiographical. Yet, the poem lacks the transcendental nature of the Romantics. O'Hara's actions are not only mundane (or anti-Romantic), but the anti-confessional stance of the expression fails to provide a glimmering crystal of insight that would transcend the poem's boundaries. As John Ashbery writes in his introduction to O'Hara's Collected Poems:

> [O'Hara] does not linger over aspects of himself hoping that his self-absorption will make them seem exemplary. Rather he talks about himself because it is he who happens to be writing the poem. . . . (x)

While it seems necessary to try to respond to O'Hara's poetry as a portrait of the artist, it remains difficult

because such un-confessional self absorption only hints at the outline of the person, it never brings the figure of the poet into strikingly clear focus. The poet makes a very obvious presence felt, but devoid of intention or deep insight, the full personality often proves elusive. Hence, an implicit tension arises from this shadowy representation. A tension that has been noted and described by a number of O'Hara's critics.

Ashbery writes that "[O]ne frequently feels that [O'Hara] is trying on various pairs of brass knuckles until he finds the one which fits properly" (vii-viii). Charles Molesworth, in his essay "The Clear Architecture of the Nerves", writes that O'Hara's poems "reflect their humanness in a special way; they flaunt it and defy it at the same time" (224). James E. Breslin describes the tension best in his chapter on O'Hara from his book From Modern To Contemporary: American Poetry 1945-1965 where he observes that

> O'Hara exists both everywhere and nowhere in his poems. We see things through his eyes, but we can never step back, surround and frame him. . . . (224)

At once, both present and absent in his poetry, O'Hara's subject is consistently slippery.

One way of bridging the gap between presence and absence is to subvert Barthes' principle outright and attempt to locate the biographical elements in the poetry.

Homage to Frank O'Hara, an anthology of anecdotes, photographs, poetry, and artwork by O'Hara's contemporaries and friends, acts as a worthy companion to the poetry in this regard. Beside the poetry, Homage becomes a kind of manual decoding device that fleshes out the personalities of the names in the poems as it details the conditions of O'Hara's social life and his artistic motivation. O'Hara's personality (his person, really) comes into clearer focus as one is able to chart the implicit autobiographical nature of the poetry. The poems and the biographic information feed off one another until the poems seem to hold the body of their maker.

While reading the poems in this fashion makes them easier to digest, or merely confirms their status as biographical documents, this method of interpretation also ignores the inner tension that motivates the work. While the poems loudly proclaim their subjective status, the subject is only partially visible. Consequently, there is a complex texture to the work, and this complexity must not be overlooked. Donald Barthelme, writing of the difficult nature of much contemporary writing, states:

> Art is not difficult because it chooses to be difficult, but because it wishes to be art. However much the writer might long to be, in his work, simple, honest, straightforward, these virtues are no longer available to him. He discovers that in being honest,

> simple, straightforward, nothing much happens: he speaks the speakable whereas what we are looking for is the as-yet unspeakable, the as-yet unspoken. (28)

To truly penetrate O'Hara's work it is necessary to confront the inner tension and to examine how the author can be at once both present and absent.

It is in this context that "The Death of the Author" seems most important. While "The Death of the Author" is clear in its theoretical position, it does not outline a strategy that tells the reader how to penetrate a text. Yet, the metaphor of textual mortality that underlies this essay points toward an understanding of how the Author's vulnerability may motivate the way a text can be read. While the phenomenon that is "The Death of the Author" may very well exist without Barthes (simply: "the author produces the text, the reader produces the meaning of that text") (Kleinu 152), the notion of textual mortality not only subverts a traditional power structure, it also dramatizes the act of reading. Barthes introduces a certain violence to the act, and through this violence the author and the reader become players in a drama. It does not take a large metaphorical leap to imagine the text as a battlefield where the author and the reader meet. Barthes tells us that life and death are played out in this confrontation: "the birth of the reader must be requited by

the death of the author". The text is captured, in its moment of transition, squarely between the two players. It is in this moment, the moment that we consider the author's imminent overthrow, that we become aware of his potential for presence. In this moment, the author is caught between preservation and destruction. While reading becomes a drama of confrontation and overthrow, it also demands that we consider the author's potential for life.

Svetlana Boym, in Death in Quotation Marks, considers the metaphor inherent in Barthes' essay and declares that

> The survivor in Barthes' ritual killing of the author is the reader, who is finally liberated from extra-textual authority and who can now become a new kind of writer. (19)

Reading in a post-Barthesian context, I propose, must include an appreciation of the author's potential for both life and death. This new kind of writer must seek to find the ways that the author is both present and absent in his text. Thus, reading with an appreciation of the metaphorical struggle inscribed into a text invites new modes of interpretation. It becomes necessary to confront the text's duality, to consider how the character of the author is preserved and how it is absented. Authorial presence becomes not a biographical concern - not a way of weeding a biography from the text - but an understanding of how a text can contain its original "writing" and thereby

preserve the character of the author. Reading for absence, on the other hand, appreciates the author's ability to disappear from the text. This kind of reading recognizes that regardless of the amount of active expression or personality infused into a text by the author, the completed text inevitably assumes the status of product. With this new status, the author is able to escape the reader's "ritual killing" by staging a disappearance. The dichotomy of presence and absence can also be viewed as the discrepancy between process and product, or between what is enunciated and what is inscribed.

These dichotomies are central to O'Hara's poetry. In "The Critic" O'Hara reveals his appreciation of this tension, and his understanding of his own vulnerable position.

I cannot possibly think of you
other than you are: the assassin

of my orchards. You lurk there
in the shadows, meting out

conversation like Eve's first
confusion between penises and

snakes. Oh be droll, be jolly
and be temperate! Do not

frighten me more than you

have to! I must live forever. (CP 48)

O'Hara is aware of the interpretative power of the reader and the violence that this power allows. By addressing the reader as an assassin, O'Hara recognizes that his textual life is at risk in this relationship. Indeed, one of the most interesting aspects of the poem is the shift that occurs in the final three lines. Early in the poem O'Hara's concern is that the reader will misinterpret the text and place importance where none is intended. The final two lines, however, contain a revelation in their expression of personal concern and fear: "Do not/ frighten *me* more than you/ have to! *I* must live forever." Suddenly, the author is not frightened for his poem but for his own self. The author longs to be immortal, to transcend the muddling readers who approach the text. Octavio Paz writes that

> . . .every poet wishes to be read in the future, and in a profounder and more generous way than in his own time. It is a thirst for fame; a thirst for life. (605)

"The Critic" shows O'Hara craving life and longevity, but understanding that such longings are complicated by the way that readers approach the text.

Marjorie Perloff views "The Critic" as a stricture which defines the delicate way that we must treat O'Hara's poems. While she is correct, and while this poem does sound

a cautionary warning, what must be acknowledged is the insight that this poem grants us into O'Hara's subjective representation in the poems. "The Critic" shows O'Hara very much aware of the figure who will receive the text and equally concerned with what this figure will do to O'Hara's personality. Within this light, "The Death of the Author" resonates, and O'Hara's poetry invites a new strategy of reading. If we consider O'Hara's poetry as poetry that understands the inevitable struggle between reader and author, it is possible to see how the poetry resists the reader's power to dethrone. Inherent in O'Hara's poetry is the understanding that upon the transfer of the text, the reader will attempt to appropriate it. Consequently, we can view O'Hara's simultaneous presence and absence as two methods of combatting the reader's quest.

Approaching O'Hara's poetry with this in mind invariably includes assuming that each poem holds in its construction the possibilities for both presence and absence. As readers, we must bisect the poems and consider both the representation of the writer and his staged disappearance. Reading becomes two-fold. In reading for presence, as Chapter 2 will do, it is necessary to examine the way that the text is primarily a document of the process of creation. By considering the way that O'Hara's poetry aims to capture a spontaneous texture it is possible to locate the author in the text. Furthermore, O'Hara's mode

of composition will be compared with Jackson Pollock's method of action painting, and contrasted with the French Surrealist poet's method of automatic writing.

Chapter 3, on the other hand, will consider the way that the author absents himself from the text, thereby eliminating the reader's ability to slay him. Reading for absence considers the text as an inscribed product rather than a process of unfolding creativity. As such, the vulnerability of the author seems outside of the text. O'Hara's poems highlight their status as monuments and are thus able to establish a context for the author's disappearance. Also, O'Hara's use of non-referential language invites the reader to appropriate the text. Finally, O'Hara's metonymic inclination reverberates throughout his poetry and points to the fact that the character presented in the poems is not the complete figure of the author. O'Hara's self cannot be contained in any one poem.

This study, then, argues against itself. It seeks first to place presence in the poems, and then, it seeks to dismantle this construction. It is necessary to work in these two opposite directions, however, if we are to discover another way in which O'Hara's poetry subverts "The Death of the Author": it replaces death with desire. The intermingling of presence and absence in O'Hara's poetry proves seductive in the way it begs the reader to search out

the author figure. When absence and presence are slipped on top of one another like transparencies, the text becomes a place where the author and the reader converge, sliding together in a drama that replaces violence with eros.

In The Pleasure of the Text Roland Barthes re-evaluates the relationship between the reader and the author and concludes that a reader may wish to replace the desire to kill the author with the desire to attain pleasure from the experience of reading. Barthes writes:

> As institution, the author is dead. . .but in the text, in a way, I desire the author: I need his figure. . . as he needs mine. . . .(27)

In many ways, The Pleasure of the Text is possible only in a post-"Death of the Author" context. The strategy for reading embedded in the earlier work presents the necessary groundwork for the formation of pleasure. "The Death of the Author" reveals the author's textual vulnerability which opens the space for desire. By establishing the author and the reader as opposing forces, "The Death of the Author" divides the text - on the one hand there is the text that the author has written, on the other hand there is the text that the reader activates. The Pleasure of the Text seeks to reconcile these oppositions by suggesting that reading, like a sexual consummation, grants the most pleasure when the two parties become meshed in one another.

Reading for pleasure demands the creation of a split

subject, a subject that contains, at once, both the self and the other. As Barthes writes, the reader must become a "living contradiction" or

> a split subject, who simultaneously enjoys, through the text, the consistency of his selfhood and its collapse, its fall. (21)

In order to achieve a high degree of pleasure (what Barthes calls *jouissance* which is roughly translated as bliss), the reader must be willing to lose himself in the author's figure while never departing completely from his sense of self. Bliss through reading requires, then, an appreciation of the author's potential for both presence and absence in the text. It requires the simultaneous experiences of appropriation and loss.

In Frank O'Hara's poetry, presence and absence converge and in this convergence, they open a space where bliss is a possible reward. In "Personism" O'Hara writes of his desire for the poem to sit "between two people instead of two pages". This desire requires the reader to refigure the character of the author while also finding a site that he, the reader, may occupy. O'Hara's poem "In Memory of My Feelings" presents a textual meeting place where the ideas Barthes envisions in The Pleasure of the Text may be activated.

O'Hara's subject is knowingly fractured in "In Memory of My Feelings". What we find is a heap of varying poses,

multiple representations, and contradictions. Within this fractured subject is a highlighting of the author's presence and his absence, and hence a seductive manoeuvre that beckons to the reader. "I am not quite you, but almost", O'Hara writes in the final section of the poem, as if he knows how the reader will approach the poem, and how they may be able to interact.

Chapter 4 will consider "In Memory of My Feelings" as a text of bliss, and the poem will be examined with ideas borrowed from Barthes' study. Contradiction, the art of prattle, the eroticism of the seam, naming, and cruising the reader, will be explored to show how the poem becomes a site of mutual pleasure. A pair of opposites in the form of presence and absence, and the reader and the author, will converge and the text will find itself reconstructed in a new fashion. But first the text must be dismantled. First, the Author's presence and his absence must be proclaimed.

Chapter 2

The Presence Of The Author

"Once the author is distanced," Roland Barthes writes in "The Death of the Author", "the claim to 'decipher' a text becomes entirely futile" (53). While revolution in reading can begin once we are able to remove the author from the text, the task of removal can be viewed as a concern in itself. In Frank O'Hara's Lunch Poems the author resists erasure. O'Hara places emphasis on the production of the text and thereby manages to create poetry that resonates with his own personality. Poetry that has the feel of process demands that the reader conjure an image of the author as the creative impulse that sparked the work. The active texture of the poetry makes it inseparable from the author in the original act of writing.

To understand how presence is captured in the poetry, this active texture will be examined. First, O'Hara's insistence on speed and motion as structuring devices will be considered. From this, we can begin to understand how O'Hara's poetry creates the illusion that the author is writing the text anew each time the work is activated by the reader. To obtain a greater sense of how O'Hara's poetry blurs the boundaries between inspiration and action, his writing will be compared to Jackson Pollock's action

painting. In this comparison it is necessary to respect the differences between poetic and painterly space and to consider how the poetic medium grants O'Hara a unique possibility of presence. What is revealed, however, is that O'Hara's poetry is not only a poetry of presence, but also a poetry of the present; it is writing that manages to erase temporal boundaries. Thus, the poetry adopts a texture that is continuously contemporary. In this regard, we can relate O'Hara's work to Charles Olson's and Olson's theory of "composition by field". O'Hara's ability to draw from the energy of his physical and mental landscapes allows him the freedom to write spontaneous verse which records the progression of an everyday consciousness. It is this combination of consciousness and spontaneity that finally reveals O'Hara's capacity for presence in the text. The chapter concludes by contrasting O'Hara's style of automatic writing with the French Surrealist Poets' mode of automatism which stresses a turning off of the conscious faculties. As a beginning, though, it is necessary to get a sense of the momentum captured in Lunch Poems. "Poem (Lana Turner Has Collapsed)" provides a valuable starting point.

O'Hara's "Poem (Lana Turner Has Collapsed)" is illuminated by a telling anecdote. Joe LeSueur recounts that O'Hara composed the poem "on the Staten Island Ferry on the way to a reading at Wagner College" (48), and proceeded to open his reading with the poem that he had just written.

In the greater context of O'Hara's poetry this anecdote proves vital as it establishes a tone for O'Hara's method of composition. "Frank O'Hara wrote his poems quickly", Kenneth Koch acknowledges,

> The speed and accidental aspects of his writing are not carelessness but are essential to what the poems are about: the will to catch what is there while it is really there and still taking place. . . .
> ("Imagination" 23)

When we take Koch's analysis of O'Hara' method of writing to "Poem" there seems to be a discrepancy. There is nothing in the poem about a ferry ride, nothing about going to give a reading, nothing at all that would bring to mind the context of its conception. A certain recklessness can be found in the poem's progression, however. The speed of delivery and embrace of the accidental contributes to the poem's overall texture and makes the surrounding story illuminating.

The poem moves quickly, picking up ideas and shaping them on the spot:

> it started raining and snowing
> and you said it was hailing
> but hailing hits you on the head
> hard so it was really snowing and
> raining and I was in such a hurry. . . . (LP 70)

The poem's humorous logic leaves no room for explicit explanations. Instead, it is all wrapped up in its forward

momentum and desire to capture rapidly moving thoughts. Except for two exclamation marks, the poem lacks punctuation of any sort. Like a run-on story told in a stream of emotion the poem rambles with extemporaneous, almost gratuitous details. One may be reminded of these lines from "Fantasy":

> The main thing is to tell a story.
>
> It is almost
>
> very important. (LP 73)

The story in "Poem" is sketchy at best, if considered in the realm of formal story telling. It is as if O'Hara himself is uncertain of how important the story really is. Certainly, O'Hara does not pretend to be formal. The poem resembles a story told casually to a friend over lunch, or at the bus stop, or on a ferry ride. What the poem stresses is its apparent lack of polish or formal organization. There is the sense that nothing has been crossed out or rearranged, as if the poet had no preconceived notion of the direction the story/poem would take. What is captured is the mind sparked by a poetic impulse, moving forward and defying expectations. "He did not seek to impose order on experience" (45), Alan Feldman writes in his book Frank O'Hara. O'Hara does seek to capture experience, however, in whatever form it presents itself. O'Hara is prepared to capture whatever makes itself present. In this sense, the poem becomes all authorial presence. It becomes presence of

attention and production rather that presence of intention of meaning. The poem exists as a process that is inseparable from the body that created it.

If the reader tries to distance the poem from the voice that speaks, the poem begins to blur like a photograph out of focus. Without a real author behind the poem, the words lose their centre. In The Art of Life, Multu Konuk Blasing writes that

> . . .the structure of a work is determined not by the demands of pre-existing forms but by the shape of the artist's feeling or 'state of spiritual clarity' at the time. (145)

In acknowledging the poem as the enunciation of the author's feelings, the reader is forced to construct an image of the artist who exists as the site of that utterance.

Wolfgang Iser, in The Implied Reader, discusses how the formation of illusions is a necessary part of the act of reading:

> Without the formation of illusions, the unfamiliar world of the text would remain unfamiliar; through the illusions, the experience offered by the text becomes accessible to us. . . . (285)

In Lunch Poems the illusion that must be formulated is the poet in the act of writing. An examination of O'Hara's early poem "Autobiographia Literaria" shows how O'Hara infuses presence into the text, which makes it difficult for

the reader to distance the author.

When I was a child
I played by myself in a
corner of the schoolyard
all alone.

I hated dolls and I
hated games, animals were
not friendly, and birds
flew away.

If anyone was looking
for me I hid behind a
tree and cried out "I am
an orphan."

And here I am, the
centre of all beauty!
writing these poems!
Imagine! (CP 11)

O'Hara is able to consider himself the "centre of all beauty" not in the poems themselves, but in the act of writing them. While involved in the process of actively constructing the poems, O'Hara is able to actively construct himself as their central figure. While the pen is making contact on the paper, while the fingers touch the typewriter

keys, O'Hara must see himself as the central, creating force. Yet, this vision also considers the figure of the reader. That is, while O'Hara knows that during composition he is central, he is also aware that when the poem is adopted by the reader his position will have changed.

The movement of the first three lines of the last stanza of "Autobiographia Literaria" is continuous, regardless of the exclamation mark that ends line two. This can be ascertained from the use of the lower case letter that opens the third line. This lower case letter must be contrasted with the capital letter used in the word "Imagine" in line four. This final line, therefore, must be regarded as a departure from the earlier thought. An imaginary pause must be allotted between the third and fourth lines to give the word "Imagine" the weight that it desires. The final word demands weight because essentially it is trying to accomplish two things at once. On the one hand, the word must be accepted as an expression of the author's own delight. Compared to the inadequate feelings that dominated his childhood the act of writing provides the speaker with a vision of the self that he can regard with confidence. The word "Imagine" displays with breathless excitement the amazement that O'Hara feels as he becomes conscious of his creativity. Yet, the word also extends outward to the reader. Quite literally O'Hara demands that the reader imagine him in the very act of writing. To be

the very centre of all beauty O'Hara must be writing, not read:

> Art. . . is a form of self-destruction. If, in its recording as art, life becomes conscious, it also becomes permanently fixed. In other words, the past is cancerous and must be exorcised, but the exorcised past no longer belongs to the poet. (Blasing 150)

While the completed poem equals self-destruction, a poem considered as a process can keep its author firmly at the centre. If the reader can visualize O'Hara in the act of writing, imagine O'Hara writing these poems, there is the possibility that O'Hara will remain forever centralized.

Like the plea "Imagine", the poems contained in the volume Lunch Poems ask the reader to consider O'Hara in the very act of writing. Whether or not all of these poems were created as spontaneously as "Poem (Lana Turner)" is inconsequential. O'Hara would like the reader to imagine that they were. The back cover of the volume reads:

> Often this poet, strolling through the noisy splintered glare of a Manhattan noon, has paused at a sample Olivetti to type up thirty or forty lines of ruminations. . . .

To distance the author from the text would not only be problematic, it would also be incorrect. One of the conditions the text lays down to the reader is to contemplate the author in the act of writing.

In Lunch Poems, O'Hara wants to confront us not with a volume of poems, but instead with a series of poetic processes. The effect is to establish the poem as a field of motion where the author is continually present. At the same time, the poem is distanced from its status as monument. O'Hara works toward this end by creating poetry that thrives on its own progression, as in "Music" the opening poem of the book.

> If I rest for a moment near the Equestrian
> pausing for a liver sausage sandwich in the Mayflower
> Shoppe,
> that angel seems to be leading the horse into
> Bergdorf's
> and I am naked as a table cloth, my nerves humming.
> Close to the fear of war and the stars which have
> disappeared.
> I have in my hands only 35c, it's so meaningless to
> eat!
> and gusts of water spray over the basins of leaves
> like the hammers of a glass pianoforte. (LP 7)

While "Music" begins with the statement "If I rest...", it soon becomes clear that resting is hardly on this poet's agenda. While the limbs may be still, the mind moves quickly, sacrificing logic for momentum, attention, and reception. "Don't be bored, don't be lazy, don't be trivial and don't be proud", O'Hara says of David Smith's sculpture.

"The slightest loss of attention leads to death" (in Berkson 226). Of course, the same holds true for O'Hara's poetic vision. In "Music" O'Hara displays a constant awareness of his surroundings and his reception of them, and thus he is able to evade death by passivity. Information is recorded as soon as it is experienced. The poem is written in the present tense, which keeps the reader always near the creative process in action. Emotions, sights, thoughts, and tactile sensations explode in a constant progression that explores art as process rather than recollection. Once the reader enters the poem he does not have to "imagine" the poet writing; the unfolding of the poem makes the reader privy to the very creation of the poem itself.

"Music" becomes an autobiographical document which holds in its body the conditions of its own creation. The author is present because his poem retains a continued sense of that initial act of writing. In this light, it is valuable to consider action painting as performed by Jackson Pollock as an analogue to O'Hara's mode of poetic production. Both O'Hara's poetry and Pollock's paintings display "art [as] no longer meditation but act. No longer pursuit but arrival" (Berger 143). In their respective abilities to document the act of production, each artist attains a considerable presence in the final work. O'Hara, describing the effect of Pollock's paintings, writes:

. . .the action of inspiration traces its marks. . .

> with no reference to exterior image or environment. It is scale and no-scale. It is the physical reality of the artist and his act of expressing it. . . . (JP 29)

The canvas becomes the site of performance and the scale of the "painting [becomes] that of the painter's body" (JP 28). In a similar fashion, O'Hara's poems resonate with the act of their conception and the scale of the poem holds the poet's physical self.

Creative inspiration can, by itself, provide a basis for art. We see this in O'Hara's poetry where the poem becomes the space that the author's desire to create and his actual effort meet. This is visible in Pollock's canvases, as well, where the artist's action is not only the hinge between inspiration and product, it is also the subject. O'Hara writes of Pollock's endeavour:

> His action is immediately art, not through will, not through esthetic posture, but through a singleness of purpose which is a result of all the rejected qualifications and found convictions forced upon him by his strange ascent. (22)

Confronting inspiration and unleashing it as its spark reaches the apex invariably binds the moment and the act. Consequently, Pollock's art "speak[s] with unimpeded force and unveiled honesty" (22). There is no censoring of what is acceptable as art, and the work pushes the boundaries of convention. It also justifies its existence and the

existence of its maker through this unencumbered expression.

Pollock's action painting further emphasizes the act of the artist because of the way that raw materials were utilized:

> Very few things, it seems were assimilated or absorbed by Pollock. They were left intact and given back. Paint is paint, shells and wire are shells and wire, glass is glass, canvas is canvas. You do not find, in his work a typewriter becoming a stomach, a sponge becoming a brain. (JP 16-17)

The effect of Pollock's material is not unlike the effect of O'Hara's use of language. Often in Lunch Poems the language that O'Hara employs reveals itself to be nothing so much as a language game. In "On Rachmaninoff's Birthday" (LP 11) O'Hara unleashes words for their value as language rather than their value as images: "fig-newton/playing the horn", "palace of oranges", "yoyo, carpenter's pencil" - these objects all exist without definition or explanation. They work to define nothing so much as their role in the act of creation. Their presence simply signifies the act of the mind constructing language. Like Pollock's materials, O'Hara's yoyo is not an eyeball, his carpenter's pencil is not phallic. These are words that defy the reader to find a place for them anywhere but in the home of the poem. Their lack of symbolic weight allows the reader to concentrate on nothing but the writer's search for language that will keep

the poem pushing forward. As the tool of his occupation, O'Hara not only utilizes language, he emphasizes it. He is explicit in naming what he sees, everything from Lana Turner to the Mayflower Shoppe to a palace of oranges.

> Just as action painters were calling our attention to the basic materials of their art - paint, colour, canvas - and seeing the latter as a field of action, poets began calling our attention to the basic materials of theirs - words interacting with one another to fill the white space of a page and create autonomous worlds. (Moramarco 438)

While O'Hara and Pollock are engaged with similar concerns, the manner in which they are able to express themselves is bound to differ based on their differing materials.

Commenting on O'Hara's poem "Why I am Not a Painter", Marjorie Perloff asserts that on first reading the poem the reader is drawn toward the differences between painting and poetry. The painter "Mike Goldberg is constantly 'taking out' [until] finally nothing remains of SARDINES but the letters" that the painter began with. O'Hara, on the other hand, "keeps 'putting in' and 'putting in'" distancing the poem from the initial notion that spurred it. Perloff goes on to suggest, however, that upon further reading it becomes clear

> that poetry and painting are part of the same spectrum. . . [that] art does not tolerate division; it

must be viewed as process not product. (112)

While it is important to define the similar emphasis on process in the two arts, it still must be acknowledged that the processes of the two artists do differ. In confronting the differences one must acknowledge the differing spaces that the artists have to work with.

The difference between painterly space and writerly space is the amount of expansiveness that each area allows. When the space of the painter's activity (the canvas) is acted upon, its texture becomes elevated. The paint (and the shells and the wire) are fitted on top of each other creating a texture that pushes outward. The surface is not flat, but the canvas is restrictive, allowing only a limited area on which to construct. Poetic space, on the other hand, becomes elongated as it is worked upon. A poet like O'Hara who insists on constant motion instead of polish and order must conceive of the length of the poem as comparable to temporal space. In the act of writing the poem becomes stretched out, indicating not only the author's search for language but also time's inability to hold still.

Michel Foucault in "What is an Author?" discusses Arabian narratives and their equation of story telling with the passing of time:

> . . .the motivation, as well as the theme and the pretext of Arabian narratives - such as <u>The Thousand and One Nights</u> - was also the eluding of death: one

spoke, telling stories into the early morning, in order to forestall death, to postpone the day of reckoning that would silence the narrator. (979)

O'Hara's poetry, in its unravelling style, alienates death as it remains in motion. In an effort to keep his presence firmly established, the poetry must be read as if it is describing an always current present.

In "Poetry of the Present", D.H. Lawrence describes a kind of poetic expression that utilizes action as a defining force:

> Poetry is, as a rule, either the voice of the far future, exquisite and ethereal, or it is the voice of the past, rich, magnificent. . . .
>
> But there is another kind of poetry: the poetry of that which is at hand: the immediate present. In the immediate present there is no perfection, no consummation, nothing finished. . . .
>
> The seething poetry of the incarnate Now is supreme, beyond even the everlasting gems of the before and after. In its quivering momentaneity it surpasses the crystalline, pearl-hard jewels, the poems of the eternities. (181-182)

O'Hara's Lunch Poems are poems of the "incarnate Now". They are plasmatic, moving, slipping. The poems feel unfinished and retain a sense of their conception rather than a sense of sharp completion. Poetry that is "the chronicle of the

creative act that produces it" (Ashbery viii-ix), poetry that works so desperately to capture the moment of composition, allows more than just a glimpse into the creative journey of the poet. It actually grants the author life each time that the poem is read.

Barthes writes that "the Author... is always conceived as the past of his own book" (52). O'Hara, who understands that "he is not furnished with a being which precedes or exceeds his writing..." (Barthes) refuses to place his presence anywhere but in the actual construction of the poems. In acting out a poetry of the present, O'Hara is able to become the present of his own book and consequently, he refuses to become what Foucault calls "the dead man in the game of writing" (458). O'Hara demands that the reader conjure the image of the poet in "Poetry", where he writes:

> All this I desire. To
> deepen you by my quickness
> and delight as if you
> were logical and proven,
> but still be quiet as if
> I were used to you; as if
> you would never leave me
> and were the inexorable
> product of my own time. (CP 49)

O'Hara would like his quickness of expression not only to delight the reader, but also to bridge the gap between the

two agents. In the same way that O'Hara is aware of the reader, he would like the reader to be aware of the writer of the poem. He wants to transport the reader, wants to make him the "product of [his] own time". O'Hara wishes to consume the reader; he is aware of how easily his character could be appropriated, but he wishes to suspend this logical outcome. Instead, he wants the reader to move into the author's realm, accepting such poetry of the present as, indeed, a poetry of presence.

O'Hara's desire is realized through poems that respect the slipperiness of "the present", and hence are filled with action and motion: "O'Hara becomes so immediately present because he gives us his psyche (and frequently his body) moving. . ." (Libby 145). O'Hara's ability to create motion at the site of the poem enables the construction of an authorial presence that is inseparable from the text. O'Hara's insistence on motion, his insistence on capturing an experience itself rather than the sense of that experience keeps his character in the writing. A poem like "Music", "does not explore the speaker's past so as to determine what has made him the person he is. . ." (Perloff 135). Recollection as a road to spiritual insight is absent in O'Hara's poetry and what is presented instead is experience in its purest form: poetry as action, action as writing, the poet inseparable from the poem.

O'Hara is able to transcend his own temporal boundaries

and to write poetry that continually feels immediate because his work is consumed with forward momentum. "You just go on your nerve", O'Hara confesses in "Personism". "If someone is chasing you down the street with a knife you just run. . .". "On Rachmaninoff's Birthday" feels like it was written by a poet with a sprinter's sensibility.

> Quick! a last poem before I go
> off my rocker: Oh Rachmaninoff!
> Onset, Massachusetts. Is it the fig-newton
> playing the horn? Thundering windows
> of hell, will your tubes ever break
> into powder? Oh my palace of oranges,
> junk shop, staples, umber, basalt;
> I'm a child again when I was really
> miserable, a group pizzicato. My pocket
> of rhinestone, yoyo, carpenter's pencil,
> amethyst, hypo, campaign button,
> is the room full of smoke? Shit
> on the soup, let it burn. So it's back.
> You'll never be mentally sober.

O'Hara introduces the poem with the announcement that this poem will be written quickly. Immediately he has fixed himself a position in the poem as its creator or reason for existence. In the proclamation that the poem will be written quickly, O'Hara bridges the gap between his personal need to write a poem and the speedy rambling of the poem

itself. What is collected in the poem is the sensory material available to the author as he writes. Much like "Music" where the poem's content is composed of what the poet sees on the street, "On Rachmaninoff's Birthday", contains nothing that may have existed outside of the poem's coming into being. There is no point of historical reference that the poem is pointing toward. While Rachmaninoff's Birthday is defined as the occasion, it seems most likely that the event is incidental; it is a part of the wholeness of the poem, but not necessarily the reason for its being.

The piece is a poem of the present, and so time takes on a nearly unravelled quality. It would be impossible to draw a time line comprised of numerous fixed points. Even when O'Hara begins a shift toward recollection with the line "I am a child again when I was really/miserable", his use of memory does not act as a step backward in time. The childhood memory is played back in the present tense so that he is able to define how he feels at the moment of writing, not how he felt so long ago. Instead of using memory to uncover a history that is alien to the moment of creation, O'Hara emphasizes the present act of recognition thereby keeping the poem fluid and contemporary. He does not utilize flashback to show how he was as a child; instead he slides the past forward so as to describe how he feels at the moment of enunciation. The intermingling of the past

and present create an effect that is something akin to Dali's melting clocks. What remains, finally, is the sense of the author feeling a particular way and defining the present awareness of that feeling rather than the past in all its emotive and latent details.

The images that O'Hara does associate with childhood exist so devoid of definition that they refuse to point to anything beyond their immediate call into language. The focus is continually upon the need to get words down, to keep the poem going, to keep the present fluid. When the poem suddenly shifts in line twelve, and the poet asks, "is the room full of smoke?", there is no reason to consider this as anything more but a continuation of the poet's constant spinning of language. It is only in the next line and the revelation that the outer reality has not stopped while O'Hara has been writing that we discover that soup has been on the burner, and yes, the soup may be burning, and the room may very well be full of smoke. The writing of the poem does not exclude anything that is actually happening while the poem is being written. The poem welds together the inner working of the mind with the exterior reality of the poet's surroundings. We are presented with what Linda Hutcheon calls "mimesis of process", writing that is conscious of its own undertaking. O'Hara takes us step by step through the writing of a poem that does not isolate itself from what is "really" happening. All experience,

both interior and exterior, is captured in the poem, and these things define the poet at the particular moment of writing. The result is poetry that continuously exalts the present.

O'Hara's conception of the poem is reminiscent of Charles Olson's "composition by field" which stresses three qualities in the production of a poem. First, Olson writes, "A poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it" (148). The poem must reflect the poet's inspiration, it must contain the energy that necessitated its creation. The second quality Olson stresses is that "form is never more than an extension of content" (149). This is the principle that defines the way a poem will look. The final quality Olson presents is that the process of a poem must be defined by "one perception. . . immediately and directly [leading] to another perception" (149). Olson's notion of poetic construction seems innately part of O'Hara's creations. "On Rachmaninoff's Birthday", for example, effortlessly enacts Olson's composition by field. The poem is marked by its ability to trace the inspirational energies of the poet. The poem progresses with a desire to capture mental shifts. For readers, perhaps the most important thing that Olson says is that his theory "ought to get us. . . inside the machinery" (149). Writing that documents the processes of the mind, does indeed take the reader inside the creative energy of the poem. A reader who is able to chart the

automatic shifts of the poem is taken inside the poem's mechanics; the reader is witness to the bare bones of construction.

O'Hara learned the value of automatic writing not from Olson, however, but from French Surrealist poets like Andre Breton. Perloff writes that, for O'Hara,

> [t]he lessons of Dada and Surrealism, have. . . been learned; even the most casual personal poems retain the witty modulations and sudden polarization of images found in [this] poetry. . . . (126)

Like the French Surrealist poets, O'Hara favoured writing quickly and automatically, following inspiration wherever it would lead. The Surrealist technique of automatic writing subverts formal modes of writing by refusing to edit during the creative process. Andre Breton describes this in "The Automatic Message":

> To correct oneself, to polish, to smooth out. . . this is a command which, in art as elsewhere, slavish customs and poorly understood rigour have for centuries asked us to obey. (98)

Following the Surrealist tradition, O'Hara uses his errors and mistakes to propel the poem forward. Instead of crossing out and reshaping, O'Hara uses miscalculations and errors to chart the mind's action as it considers and reconsiders.

In "St. Paul and All That" we find an overt example of

O'Hara's reluctance to edit his writing:

Totally abashed and smiling

I walk in
sit down and
face the frigidaire

it's April
no May
it's May (LP 57)

The mistake becomes part of the mental progression and is absorbed into the rest of the poem. For O'Hara to have written "it's April", then realized that it is in fact May, and to go back and cross out "it's April", and replace this with "it's May" would oppose O'Hara's poetic goals. First, the image of the writer writing would fade if not for this manoeuvre. Second, the fluid twist of the lines shows again how the poet reacts to the mental shifts that occur moment to moment and hence the poem and the poet remain vital and fresh. Finally, by including the mistake as part of the poem the poet is able to display how the mind is conscious of the activity it is involved in. As Anthony Libby writes in "O'Hara on the Silver Range":

> What is 'corrected' is not erased, not completely painted over, but left to enrich the general texture; the sense of acting personality comes from the poet's constant movement through various perspectives. (146)

O'Hara's consciousness marks the difference between his

method of writing and the Surrealist's method. Automatic writing as favoured by the Surrealist poets seeks to distance the poem from any kind of conscious activity.

In their desire to capture repressed ideas and hidden thoughts, the Surrealists favour automatic writing that includes a "turning off" of the conscious mental faculty. Breton writes that what is needed is "the education (actually the diseducation) of all the senses", and this can only be accomplished by a "derangement of the senses" (108). In fact, what the Surrealists call for is a way of ignoring those things that surround the artist as he is creating. As Breton and Eluard put forward in "Notes on Poetry":

> Perfection
> is laziness. (274)

Nothing could be further from O'Hara's notion of poetic inspiration as O'Hara declares, "don't be bored, don't be lazy. . . the slightest loss of attention leads to death" (in Berkson 226). Truly, the Surrealist's form of automatic writing works to distance the author from the text. The inability (or impartiality) to mix the conscious and the unconscious creates a poetry that is devoid of personality. As Barthes writes, "Surrealism helped to desacralize the image of the Author" by "urging the hand to write as fast as possible what the head was unaware of" (51). Without a conscious recognition of the action undertaken by the hand, authorial presence slips from the text. O'Hara's ability to

write quickly while retaining an awareness of his poetic action distances him from the fathers of Surrealism. O'Hara's is a desire to unify the consciousness of writing and what is going on around him with the unconscious flow of new thoughts and perceptions that arise. As Kenneth Koch writes:

> O'Hara's poems are unlike Surrealist poetry in that they do not programmatically favour these [unconscious] forces (along with dreams and violence) over the intellectual and the conscious. [O'Hara] must have felt the power and beauty of unconscious phenomena in Surrealist poems, but what he does is to use their power, and beauty to ennoble, complicate, and simplify waking actions. (Imagination 23)

What is revealed in O'Hara's poetry is attentiveness. The poetry documents the working of the mind - both conscious and unconscious - and the way that this may be captured in writing.

Consciousness and attentiveness are the reverberating qualities of the poet in O'Hara's poetry. Of Larry Rivers's art, O'Hara writes:

> What his work has always had to say to me, I guess, is to be more keenly interested while I'm still alive. And perhaps this is the most important thing art can say. (CP 515)

O'Hara's poetry confirms this outlook. Interest and

awareness, combined with a constant desire to flow with the ever changing present, are the qualities that define O'Hara's poetic voice. These are what contribute to the formation of the "I" in the poetry and the qualities which construct the author as a powerful presence. These are the qualities that reinforce this presence every time we enter the work.

It is nearly impossible to erase the image of O'Hara in the act of writing from his poems. O'Hara clings to his moment of writing and creates poetry where the moment and the poet who records that moment are inseparable. Yeat's rhetorical question at the end of "Among School Children" reverberates throughout Lunch Poems: "How can we know the dancer from the dance?" (130). In O'Hara's poetry we cannot. The poem equals the moment of its composition and the poet remains fixed within this space, the space of his own creation.

And yet, if we are to step away from the poems for a moment - step outside of their machinery - and examine them from this angle, they must be viewed as objects rather than processes. In this context, it is possible to view O'Hara's poetry as an arena from which the author has disappeared rather than performances where the author is central. In the next chapter, O'Hara's poetry will be considered in this light.

Chapter 3

Staging A Disappearance

"I am what people make of me", O'Hara writes in "On Rachmaninoff's Birthday" (CP 190) as he considers Larry Rivers' statue of him. O'Hara expresses a consciousness, here, of his own vulnerability when his self is made the subject of art. The presence that is sculpted into his poetry is vulnerable to the same displacement. When we read Lunch Poems with the intention of celebrating the poet there is ample evidence for discovery of authorial presence within the text. If, however, we wish to distance this figure from the text, it is possible to subvert this presence for absence. One impressive thing about O'Hara's poetry is the extent to which it allows the reader to subvert the authorial centre and to discover there a site of absence that the reader may possess. Poet Jim Carroll, speaking of his initial attraction to O'Hara's poetry states, "It was open for my own interpretation and I knew that that interpretation was going to be right, no matter what it was" (197). Carroll is able to speak so boldly only because O'Hara's poetry simultaneously presents and absents its maker.

O'Hara's ability to write poetry that feels like process allows for the poet to become present. When the

poem is viewed as the unfolding of a creative gesture then the poet himself occupies a central position. Yet, when the poem is regarded as a product of completed writing, it becomes possible to view the text as an arena which absents its maker. Regardless of the poem's ability to allow the reader to conjure the image of the poet writing, the inscribed poem becomes distanced from its maker, and it is necessary to separate the poem from the poet. O'Hara's poetry recognizes the vulnerability of the author as it allows for his disappearance. This chapter will first define how the occasional nature of O'Hara's process poems makes the figure of the author especially vulnerable to the reader's ritual killing. With this in mind, the chapter will then explore how O'Hara escapes this attack by absenting the poems. The poetry allows for his absence in four ways. First, the poems, for all of their spontaneous energy, do highlight their appearance as art. Thus, it becomes possible to objectify the poems and to regard the position they occupy as removed from the artist. Second, O'Hara's use of non-referential language allows the images in the poems to become spaces that imply suggestivity. Instead of pointing toward a central creating force, these suggestive images ask the reader to appropriate them in a subjective fashion. Third, metonomy, which is used frequently in O'Hara's process poems, becomes a gesture representative of O'Hara's own fragmented representation.

Finally, O'Hara's fragmented subject is revealed through his use of contradiction. The self is presented as large and unknowable, unable to be contained in any one poem.

The passing of time represents the greatest threat to the physical self and also to the poet wishing to capture that self in the text. Geoff Ward writes that "O'Hara's poetry, so often written against the clock, strives to beat time at its own game" (60). Against time's omnipresent backdrop, poetry that seeks to contain the figure of the author could be viewed as merely an exercise in futility. The poem becomes a document of the poet as he is immersed in a struggle to capture what is happening precisely as it unfolds. The poem also holds in its construction, however, the reality that in order fully to succeed the writing would have to continue on indefinitely. This is why, as Molesworth writes, there is the sense that "as soon as the poems stop talking, stop chatting, their speaker will fall dead" (209). It was established in the previous chapter that the reader is able to conjure the presence of the author by respecting the way that the poems foreground their mode of production. And the construction of this illusion is vital in considering the expressionist mode of the work. It is equally vital, however, to be able to slice through this illusion and recognize the vulnerability of an author who wishes to carve presence into the text. Regardless of the spontaneous feel of the poems, the received text is a

product of completed writing. The text is inscribed and by this very action it is made a thing. Through the act of inscription the author's textual mortality is revealed.

"A Step Away From Them", like nearly all of the Lunch Poems, revels in the constant energy of an urban afternoon. As the poet steps outside at the lunch hour, his senses are bombarded with stimulants:

> It's my lunch hour, so I go
> for a walk among the hum-colored
> cabs. First, down the sidewalk
> where laborers feed their dirty
> glistening torsos sandwiches
> and Coca-Cola, with yellow helmets
> on. They protect them from falling
> bricks, I guess. Then onto the
> avenue where skirts are flipping
> above heels and blow up over
> grates. The sun is hot, but the
> cabs stir up the air. I look
> at bargains in wristwatches. There
> are cats playing in sawdust. (18)

If the poem's recording is equivalent to the progress of time it is also an indication of how the author is trapped within this temporal framework. There is so much sensory information for the poet to absorb, and while he may try to capture everything that surrounds him, the only way that he

may fix himself a position within the action is to define and announce the exact temporal moment. Such an announcement stops the poem's flow, however, and the momentum that had been gathering is suddenly halted when the poet announces

it is 12:40 of

a Thursday

midway through the poem.

The poet may long for temporal transcendence but he cannot escape the moment of the poem's inscription. The author's attempt to fix himself within the poem also sets the stage for his inevitable disappearance. When O'Hara announces the time and the date of the writing, the poem becomes cemented in its moment of creation; a moment that disappears as soon as it is acknowledged. In other words, the poem reveals its stillpoint when it acknowledges its own present, the moment of creation. Reading always reveals the inscribed moment as a moment of the past. Furthermore, it reveals the division in the text between what the author writes and what the reader reads. As Wolfgang Iser writes in The Implied Reader:

> The literary work has two poles, which we might call the artistic and the esthetic: the artistic refers to the text created by the author, and the esthetic to the realization accomplished by the reader. (274)

It is to O'Hara's credit that he is able to subvert this

distinction by making the reader imagine the author writing. Yet, regardless of the amount of spontaneous energy infused, once the reader acknowledges the writing as an act of the past, the inherent division in the text is revealed. Consequently, reading "A Step Away From Them" is like viewing a moment trapped on film: a moment eternally locked into a specific moment of the past. The occasional nature of O'Hara's poetry defines the poem as an act completed prior to reading, as it defines the poet as a figure of the past. The poet becomes a figure whom the reader may conjure at will, but who remains, like his writing, trapped in a past that is removed from the reader's present.

Helen Vendler, in her essay "Frank O'Hara: The Virtue of the Alterable", compares O'Hara's poems to Polaroid photographs, sketches of a once fluid moment now eternally fixed:

> And here they are - some overexposed, some underdeveloped, some blurred, some unfocused, and yet any number of them succeeding in fixing the brilliance of some long forgotten lunch, or the curve of the body in a single gesture, or a snowstorm. . . . (234)

O'Hara may have hated all things that do not change, but his poems cannot escape the status of thing that they adopt in their finished form. O'Hara is a step away from his dead friends but he is also a step away from being able to write a poem that is continuously contemporary. The reader, then,

is always a step away from (or ahead of) O'Hara - the presence of the reader assumes the absence of the author.

While the poet may not be able to truly write himself into the poem, O'Hara reveals art's capacity for longevity and the salvation he finds therein. The city's excessive stimuli and its constant passing may be unmanageable, yet against the ever-changing landscape and the signs of destruction, the copy of Reverdy's Poems remains vital. O'Hara places his trust in art. He trusts monuments that are immortal in a way that the self can never be. Truly, for the poet, the place where the self becomes vulnerable is the place where art begins.

In "Poem", O'Hara writes, "I am really a woodcarver" (LP 13), as if in declaring his poetry as a solid structure he guarantees its message will withstand the passing of time. When the process of the poem is underplayed and its status as monument is elevated, O'Hara is able to absent himself from the centre of the poem. The heart becomes not an organ of flesh and blood but a book of poetry that is immortal in a way that the body can never be.

Charles Molesworth, in his essay "The Clear Architecture of the Nerves", writes that "O'Hara wanted his poems to assume the status of things, and he was even willing to run the risk that they would sink to the level of commodities" (220). If we remember "The Critic" and O'Hara's final plea of "I must live forever", it is possible

to see why O'Hara would put his trust, not in the self, but in the poem, a structure that can survive after the body has fallen. Molesworth goes on to say:

> O'Hara's ability to depersonalize his most intimate utterances, to see his poems as possessing their own status as objects conflicts with his equally strong desire for spontaneity and freedom. (221)

When O'Hara regards his poems as monuments, however, he is granted a new kind of freedom. This freedom allows him to exit the arena of the poem; to disappear before the reader proclaims him dead.

Commodities are bought, sold, and traded. They are appropriated by the receiver and through this transaction they begin to lose the imprint of their maker. Once appropriated, commodities are absorbed and altered to fit the needs of their new owner. James E. Breslin writes that ". . .O'Hara titles so many of his works 'Poem' precisely because he was aware that many of his readers would deny them the status of poetry" (216). It could be further argued that by giving so many of his pieces the generic title of "Poem", O'Hara was confirming their thingness, or their status as product. Charles Molesworth states that O'Hara's poetry becomes objectified through its own objectified use of language:

> By using the language of fantasy in a flat, commonplace way and by projecting mundane reality onto a

level occupied by the fabulous, O'Hara flattens his words into a scrap heap of nonsyntactical nondiscursive fragments that can do little beyond record - or reify - a world of objects and objectified sensations. (222)

As O'Hara fills his poem with non-referential language, the poem builds and develops a character apart from its author. The poem becomes a veritable catalogue of language; an object of artifice rather than a subjective expression.

It was argued in the last chapter that O'Hara uses non-referential language to portray a poetry of presence, a poetry of the present, a poetry that directs attention to the creative action of the poem being written and not to the weight of its images. Yet, such images can be suggestive in another way. They can point toward the absence of the author rather than his action.

Images in O'Hara's poetry are non-iconic, non-symbolic, non-mythological. They do not hold in their construction any sense of authorial intention. They speak only of themselves.

I have only two charms in my pocket
an old Roman coin Mike Kaminetsu gave me
and a bolt-head that broke off a packing case. . . (LP 33)

Because these images are tossed off quickly and without explanation they do not attain any symbolic weight and hence they do not reveal anything substantial about their poet's

character. They are like Jackson Pollock's raw materials which are given back intact. While these images signify nothing but their own recording as language, they are also able to attain a level of suggestiveness that more symbolic language cannot. Every word, every image in O'Hara's poetry has the potential to become significant to the individual reader. Poetry whose images fail to contain referential weight can read like a good mystery novel where

> [T]here is nothing wasted, no sentence, no word that is not significant. And even if it is not significant, it has the potential to be so - which amounts to the same thing. The world of the book comes to life, seething with possibilities, with secrets and contradictions. Since everything seen or said, even the slightest most trivial thing, can bear a connection to the outcome of the story, nothing must be overlooked. Everything becomes essence; the centre of the book shifts with each event that propels it forward. The centre, then, is everywhere. . . . (Auster 15)

The cataloguing of minute particulars gives O'Hara's poetry the same opening of possibilities. By confronting the way that O'Hara's images are arbitrary and devoid of signification, it is possible to see how the poetry opens itself to the possibility of multiple centres as it anticipates its appropriation by the reader.

One way of confronting the minute particulars in

O'Hara's poetry is to consider how these images veer toward the abstract and become spaces of suggestivity that the reader can fill in. In "Personism: A Manifesto", O'Hara states:

> Abstraction in poetry. . . appears mostly in the minute particulars where decision is necessary. Abstraction (in poetry, not in painting) involves personal removal by the poet. . .Personism, a movement which I recently founded and which nobody knows about, interests me a great deal, being so opposed to this kind of abstract removal that it is verging on a true abstraction for the first time, really, in the history of poetry. (CP 498)

Much of what is announced in "Personism" has a mock-serious tone to it, as if it is comedy posing in theoretical clothing. The sheer density and choppy logic here could be viewed as playful puzzle making were it not to resonate so loudly within the context of O'Hara's own poetry.

Abstraction in art defines a subversion of the work's representational qualities. The tension between what is presented (the work's semantic information) and the way that it is presented (the work's syntactical information) is what contributes to the final texture of the work and its ability to portray its subject either naturalistically or abstractly. When O'Hara reveals that abstraction, for him, "appears mostly in the minute particulars", we must define

how the syntactic presentation of the semantic information creates a space where the subject becomes open to the reader's own interpretation. An examination of O'Hara's "The Day Lady Died" provides a basis for this discussion.

Minute particulars are abundant in "The Day Lady Died". From the time of day, to the changing locations, to the names of people; O'Hara is consistent in his presentation of subjective specificity. The emphasis on subjective vision seems to show little regard for the reader's input into the poem. Yet, the poet catalogues his surroundings with such speed and momentum that little attention is devoted to their significance. The combination of subjective specificity (semantic information) and insignificance (syntactic presentation) creates a tension in the poem that throws the subject into question. These minute particulars achieve the status of spaces of abstraction that the reader must appropriate in order give the poem shape and significance.

Paul Carroll, in his essay "An Impure Poem About July 17, 1959", asks the question: "How can the poetry of trivia be distinguished from a work which simply lists one man's activity during any one day in any place?" (162). In answering this question, Carroll breaks off and plays with O'Hara's poem, observing the structure of the poem, while creating his own personal testament to a mind (and body) in motion:

It is 3:16 in Chicago a Friday

three days after Denise read anti-Viet Nam poems here,

yes

it is 1967 and I work on this essay

because I have to finish it before

I catch the 10:20 flight with Inara to NYC

where we'll spend Xmas in Red and Mimi's loft on

Mulberry. . . .

Carroll then proceeds to explore the differences between his piece and O'Hara's, always concluding that O'Hara's piece remains a poem while his does not. O'Hara's piece remains a poem, Carroll argues, because of "the nerve evident in the very act of writing it" (163). It is "an original 'act'", Carroll proclaims, it is exciting in its audacity, it is artistic and poetic precisely because it is unique. While Carroll seems on target with his insight, what he fails to realize, I believe, is that his "act" is no less poetic than O'Hara's, it is merely part of the same poem. Carroll's piece is not a poem that can be separated from O'Hara's. It is merely an extension that is both natural and invited. O'Hara's minute particulars work as abstractions because they force the reader to displace them or to transplant them with alternate examples. Of "Adieu to Norman, Bon Jour to Joan and Jean-Paul", Geoff Ward writes: "any of us middle-class speaking subjects has a friend like Kenneth and a lunch appointment next week with our own Joan or Jean-Paul" (62). What is important is recognizing how a reader's

personal knowledge can subvert O'Hara's local knowledge. The possibilities for filling in the spaces are infinite and the poem is able to reach true abstraction. Carroll implies that one could take O'Hara's poem and create something in a replicate structure. Not only can this be done, it seems clear that the poem invites this kind of re-writing. By filling "The Day Lady Died" with minute particulars, O'Hara has created a poem that anticipates Barthes' fictional reader. The poem provides direction but still remains open to plural re-writings. Each time the poem is read an imaginary appendix is tacked on to the end. The author exits the poem and allows it to be rewritten each time it is activated by the reader.

By anticipating the reader, the text continuously subverts O'Hara's character. O'Hara's poetry, therefore, hangs precariously on a wire between momentum and monument, between authority and appropriation. When examining the way that O'Hara's character disappears, it is enlightening to consider another dichotomy: the distinction between metaphor and metonymy.

Roman Jakobson first outlined the dichotomy between metaphor and metonymy, describing metaphor as a predominately poetic device and metonymy as a predominately prosaic one. The metaphoric function is used linguistically to express similitude. As Jakobson writes: "similarity connects a metaphorical term with the term for which it is

substituted" (81). Jakobson goes on to say that "the principle of similarity underlies poetry; the metrical parallelism of lines or the phonic equivalence of rhyming words prompts the question of semantic similarity and contrast. . ." (81-82).

Prose, on the other hand, functions metonymically because it foregrounds contiguity. Consequently, Jakobson argues, realism is a metonymic style because by

> following the path of contiguous relationships, the realistic author metonymically digresses from the plot to the atmosphere and from the characters to the setting in space and time. (78)

David Lodge expands upon Jakobson's notions and reveals further how prose writers utilize metonymy:

> In describing a given event. . . we cannot record the relationship between all the items in the context. . . we are obliged to choose at every stage of the discourse to report this detail rather than that, make this connection rather than that. (90)

Prose develops in a linear fashion, unfolding contiguously.

In "The Day Lady Died" O'Hara's self is continually defined as the product of his choices. What we know of the poet-speaker is based on the decisions that he makes: what he has for lunch, what he buys at the bookstore (not to mention that he goes to the bookstore at all), what he buys at the liquor store, the tobacconist, etcetera. The poet's

choices, his decisions to favour one item over another are the things that establish his character. These choices, in fact, provide an analogy for O'Hara's poetic discourse in general: his ability to choose what to report from the sprawling mass in his field of vision. O'Hara's poetry seems distinctly metonymic in nature as it develops along a pole that favours contiguity over similarity.

O'Hara's inclination toward contiguity reveals another way that we can spot the inevitability of his disappearance. In his book Painterly Abstraction in Modernist American Poetry, Charles Altieri writes that "[m]etonymic operations . . . seem to be marked by an inevitable sense of lack or displacement. . ." (449). "What exists in the present", Altieri goes on to say, "seems to have its sanction only by the force of its claim to be different from what preceded it" (450). Consequently, poetry that favours metonymy establishes the past as separated from the present and the poet as unable ever to truly capture himself completely in the text. We saw how this sense of displacement makes the author vulnerable earlier in this chapter in the examination of "A Step Away From Them". O'Hara's frequent use of metonymy, however, speaks of his own ability to transcend the poem. In the same way that the metonymic image is composed of a part standing for a whole, O'Hara's use of metonymy is symbolic of the fact that regardless of the amount of personality infused into a poem, a large part of

the author is beyond the parameters of the text. Returning to "A Step Away From Them", it is possible to see how metonymic images lay the groundwork for a poem that is concerned with displacement on a grander level.

The opening section of the poem utilizes metonymy to describe the characters on the street. Construction workers "feed their glistening torsos", and women are described only as "skirts. . . flipping above heels". These metonymic images provide an alleyway into the second half of the poem where a greater sense of lack and longing reigns.

> First,
>
> Bunny died, then John Latouche,
> then Jackson Pollock. But is the
> earth as full as life was full, of them?
> And one has eaten and one walks,
> past the magazines with nudes
> and the poster for BULLFIGHT and
> the Manhattan Storage Warehouse,
> which they'll soon tear down.

After contemplating the passing of his friends, O'Hara returns motion to the poem, but he does so with a striking turn. The pronoun one is used where earlier the pronoun I would have been written. This move filters an impersonal air over a poem that has previously relied on the expression of personality. It is as if, in considering the mortal nature of himself and his friends, the poet has momentarily

lost himself. Such a move was anticipated by the subtle use of metonymy in the opening section and it is reinforced by the image of the warehouse which closes this section. The pronouncement that the warehouse may soon be gone illuminates the general sense of loss that pervades at this point. Taken as a whole, the "I" of the poem is rendered not only vulnerable, but also transparent as its importance is deflated and the author's presence unravels.

Charles Altieri writes that

> [A] poetry able to concentrate on metonymy may be able to achieve a different kind of impersonality, one devoted not to escaping from personality, but to understanding the experience of every modern psyche as it becomes aware of how vulnerable its subjective life is. (150)

In "A Step Away From Them", O'Hara's subjective life is rendered vulnerable as it comes to realize the impermanence of its vision. Metonymy is effective as a gesture because it reinforces the notion that a large part of the poet's personality has been left out of the poem. No matter how much the reader wishes to know the poet, he or she cannot. The relationship between metonymic imagery and contiguous progression creates the sensation that the author is unable to be truly present in his work. While he is unable to escape from his personality, he is also unable to inscribe his entire self into the poetry.

It seems very much an urban dilemma that faces O'Hara. New York City, the environment that constantly inspires O'Hara's poetry provides an immense warehouse of potential material for the attentive poet. This plethora of stimulus, however, means that a poetry inspired by the city is bound to be filled with a sense of missed opportunities. Within the context of New York City, O'Hara's subjective life is rendered vulnerable because regardless of how much O'Hara may wish to capture, part of his vision will always go unrecorded. Still, to read O'Hara's poetry is to get a glimpse into the city's infinite possibility:

> Nothing could be more intense, electrifying, turbulent, and vital than the streets of New York. They are filled with crowds, hustle, and advertisements. . . There are millions of people in the streets. . . there is music everywhere. (Baudrillard 18)

In a way, O'Hara's poetry depicts New York City mimetically. By laying out the geographic and sensual texture of the landscape, it captures a portrait of the city. As a scenic background New York looms large and sprawling. The city is best understood, however, as it relates to O'Hara's self; a self that is equally large and sprawling. O'Hara refuses to adhere to any one style, he refuses to pause and clarify himself for anyone or anything. He reveals himself as a varied and contradictory subject.

In "The City Limits," Neil Bowers writes that the city

provides ". . .the potential for subject matter but also the opportunity for organizational strategies. . ." (321). The city invites a vision that is fragmented and often indefinable. If, as Baudrillard writes, there is music everywhere, how does the poet convey all of this sound? O'Hara's poetry asserts that the only possible way is to mirror it, to create a poetic voice that is equally fragmented and unknowable. Within O'Hara's poetry there is the constant sensation that he is proclaiming, like Whitman, "I am large/ I contain multitudes." Inherent also is the embracing of contradiction that must accompany such an announcement.

In the poem "My Heart", O'Hara expresses his desire to be sprawling and inconsistent.

> I'm not going to cry all the time
> nor shall I laugh all the time,
> I don't prefer one "strain" to another.
> I'd have the immediacy of a bad movie,
> not just a sleeper, but also the big,
> overproduced first-run kind. (CP 231)

O'Hara's unwillingness to be easily categorized reveals that regardless of the amount that the reader may wish to know him, embrace him, or locate him, the poet's character remains indefinable - a heap of contradictions. Regardless of how much we may wish to pull together a complete portrait of the author all we can receive is a vision of a fragmented

subject. O'Hara concludes the poem by saying

you can't plan on the heart, but

the better part of it, my poetry, is open.

O'Hara confirms what we as readers have already figured out. The poems may contain authorial presence, but the presence reveals itself only as contradictory, elusive, and open. The author is not revealed as a character whose personality is easily defined. Instead, the figure of the author is a shadowy representation whose presence is equalled only by his absence.

Working with such an open subject allows the author the liberty to create and re-create himself continuously. In "In Memory of My Feelings" O'Hara writes

grace to be born and live

as variously as possible.

O'Hara embraces the grace of the phoenix, as he allows himself the freedom to rise continually from his own ashes. Each time that the author stages a disappearance he retains the possibility of a reappearance. The author holds the possibility of re-emergence, the possibility to be newly structured and defined.

In a sense the author is simultaneously present and absent. The action inherent in the poetry grants the author a reverberating sense of presence. Yet, O'Hara's poetry remains so open and the author's character remains so indefinable that the author seems removed from the text. In

O'Hara's poetry, this duality becomes a seductive gesture. The reader desires to find the author's figure and the text becomes a site of tension. The tension that surrounds the text creates a space where pleasure is possible. The next chapter will examine "In Memory of My Feelings" in the context of Roland Barthes' The Pleasure of the Text, and it will examine how O'Hara's poem is able to offer bliss through the act of reading.

Chapter 4

The Pleasure Of "In Memory Of My Feelings"

The drama invited by "The Death of the Author" is played out disjointedly in O'Hara's poetry. Within these poems there are equal parts presence and disappearance, yet to discover either of these involves a strategic manipulation of the text. In order to penetrate the text in either of these ways, an affected position must be adopted. Consequently, each reading is based upon a sympathetic attitude as the reader asks, *do I wish to see how the author preserves his own figure*; or, *do I wish to see how the author's figure becomes vulnerable*. "The Death of the Author", then, is an invitation to split the text, opening up the division between the author and the reader.

The text itself, however, continues to hold both absence and presence within its construction. It is possible, then, to examine the poetry not as a place of conflict, but as a site of union. Roland Barthes' The Pleasure of the Text seeks to reconcile these two oppositions. This work admits that presence and absence can, and do, exist within a textual product. It seeks to redefine the relationship by concentrating on desire instead of division.

"The Death of the Author" acts as a necessary precursor

to The Pleasure of the Text. The separation that is called for in "The Death of the Author" invites the possibility of desire. As Barthes writes in The Pleasure of the Text:

> I must seek this reader (must "cruise" him) without knowing where he is. A site of bliss is then created. It is not the reader's person that is necessary to me, it is this site: the possibility of a dialectics of desire. (4)

A way of closing the gap between reader and author is accomplished here because Barthes employs multiple perspectives. Where "The Death of the Author" speaks only from an objective critical viewpoint, The Pleasure of the Text continually shifts its perspective. Barthes assumes subjective voices of both reader and writer. As well, he stands beyond these "characters" and comments objectively on the relationship. This layering of perspectives allows for a re-evaluation of the author's death as it provides a basis for understanding how a textual union based on desire can come into being:

> As institution, the author is dead. . . but in the text, in a way, I desire the author: I need his figure. . . as he needs mine. . . . (27)

The separation proposed in "The Death of the Author" can lead to desire. The reader's quest is to consummate, not to kill.

The text becomes a site, then, not of conflict, but of

mutual desire. Instead of a struggle for authority, the text joins the parties through eros. Each party longs to know the other, to absorb the other. Each party needs to be a split-subject, a subject that contains at once, both the self and the other. As Barthes writes, both reader and writer wish to be a "living contradiction" or

> a split subject, who simultaneously enjoys, through the text, the consistency of his selfhood and its collapse, its fall. (21)

"The Death of the Author", then, is a base from which pleasure is raised. The mutual desire for split subjectivity is at the centre of Barthes' conception of pleasure. When presence and absence are overlaid like transparencies, they give way to an erotic relationship that explores the patterns of pleasure and bliss.

Plaisir and *jouissance* - pleasure and bliss - are defined by Barthes as textual qualities that demand different things of the reader and offer different rewards:

> Text of pleasure: the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a comfortable practice of reading. Text of bliss: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of boredom), unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his

relation with language. (14)

The hierarchy of eroticism in reading is concerned with degrees of loss. That is, pleasure, which falls lower on the scale, involves a minimal degree of displacement for the reader. A text that involves minimal tension between the reader and the text grants pleasure in the act of reading, but it lacks the erotic energy of a more challenging text. Bliss, on the other hand, is achieved primarily through loss and displacement. It is rooted in the reader's desire to penetrate the unknowable other. It involves a build-up of energy that is attainable only through struggle. A difficult text holds within its construction the potential for this kind of energy. Reading becomes an erotic activity, fraught with tension and desire. The purpose is not to usurp the author's authority, but to struggle toward finding the author's figure. Becoming a split subject is like treating the author as a metaphorical sexual partner.

The Pleasure of the Text invites a new drama. This sexual or erotic landscape is embedded in texts that challenge the reader. In this chapter, Barthes' notion of *jouissance* will provide a basis for reading O'Hara's poem, "In Memory of My Feelings".

The inner conflict of an author who wishes to retain an air of writerly presence, but who understands the necessity of presenting a fractured, constantly disappearing subject, is played out in "In Memory of My Feelings". This poem

maneuvers between these two poles as it continuously defines the poet-speaker in one representation, and then slips quickly into a new representation. "In Memory of My Feelings" is consistent only in its expression of multiplicity and contradiction. Like the poem "My Heart", it presents the portrait of a poet who refuses to be easily classified. Nothing can be stated without making room for its opposite. The self is presented as multiple and elusive. Marjorie Perloff writes that the central theme of "In Memory of My Feelings" is

> the fragmentation and reintegration of the inner self - a self that threatens continually to dissipate under the assault of outer forces. (141)

From the opening of the poem, O'Hara's self is introduced as something like quicksilver. He splits and separates into new autonomous portraits. It is impossible to capture the fullness of the speaker because he presents himself so variously.

> My quietness has a man in it, he is transparent
> and he carries me quietly, like a gondola,
> through the streets.
> He has several likenesses, like stars and years, like numerals.
> My quietness has a number of naked selves. . . .
> (CP 252-253)

Immediately, O'Hara presents his self as an amalgam of

presence and absence. He is speaking, writing the poem, describing his self, but the self is multiple, and the multiple selves are naked.

It soon becomes clear, however, why O'Hara is resigned to this kind of portrayal. For the naked selves, O'Hara admits, are "pistols", a defense that he needs to protect his personality. Perloff writes that the poem's "I" regards himself as a victim". But, she asks, "of whom or what?" (142). Read in the context of Barthes' theory, the argument could be made that these potential killers are the readers of O'Hara's poetry. The readers come to the text and wish to conquer it. They wish to freeze the figure of the author, and they come to the text, as all readers do, with "murder in their heart" (CP 253)

After announcing the conflict in which he is immersed, O'Hara begins to describe the complex make-up of his personality - all of his multiple selves, his varied thoughts and feelings, his imaginings. This strategy dominates "In Memory of My Feelings". It continues over the poem's five parts and it is vital, not only for what it says about the poet-speaker, but also, for what it says about the relationship between this figure and his would-be killers.

If we consider "In Memory of My Feelings" in terms of the progression of Barthes' critical ideas, it is possible to see how the acknowledgement of the conflict at the beginning of the poem creates a space where *jouissance* can

take over. In the same way that bliss can only arise out of the ideas stated in "The Death of the Author", O'Hara's acknowledgement of the division between reader and author, and the inherent conflict between the two, is a necessary platform for the establishment of bliss.

In considering "In Memory of My Feelings" as a text of bliss, it is necessary to evaluate the poem with certain components in mind. Stealing from The Pleasure of the Text, O'Hara's poem will be considered with these things in mind: contradiction, the art of prattle, the eroticism of the seam, naming, and cruising the reader.

In a review of The Pleasure of the Text, B.R. McGraw writes that to obtain degrees of pleasure from a text, the reader must make "certain adjustments in [his] reading experience". Above all, McGraw states, this involves "a complete reappraisal of the importance we give to understanding a text rationally" (944). Barthes outlines this very early in The Pleasure of the Text by employing the notion of "logical contradiction" as a pathway to pleasure. The reader who wishes to obtain pleasure from a text must endure "contradiction without shame", Barthes declares; "the confusion of tongues is no longer a punishment", as through this confusion, "the subject gains access to bliss" (3-4).

"In Memory of My Feelings" is consumed with contradiction, tiny puzzles for the reader to consider, multiple perspectives for the reader to observe. Part two

of the poem opens with a couplet that seems stolen from the sphinx's tongue:

> The dead hunting
> and the alive, ahunted.

Like a twist on the earlier conflict, O'Hara contradicts himself and throws the relationship between hunter and victim into question. As the relationship becomes twisted and more complex, so too does the character of the author. He shifts freely from one stance to another:

> One of me rushes
> to window #13 and one of me raises his whip and one of me
> flutters up from the centre of the track amidst the pink flamingoes. . . . (CP 253)

A figure of numerous representations, O'Hara is only able to describe himself in a series of shifting, varying, costumes.

It becomes understandable, then, how the spontaneous writing of Lunch Poems is an invaluable tool in the construction of contradiction. O'Hara turns his vision inward and reports the multitude of information available from his own history. His dead family members become "talismans" for his own existence. In the same way that New York City presents a nearly endless catalogue of stimuli, the mind itself can focus on its own mechanisms and can produce multiple constructions of the self.

> My 10 my 19

my 9, and the several years. My
12 years since they all died, philosophically speaking.
And now the coolness of a mind
like a shuttered suite in the Grand Hotel
where mail arrives for my incognito. . . .

Aging produces a past, and each year represents a different version of the self. Though all of these representations combine to contribute to the evolved self, they also stand as various representations; self contradictions (contradictions of the self), their tension is released only through memory. The title of the poem establishes the series of contradictions that will form the poem. In recollecting the various states of emotion, O'Hara has no choice but to write the plural nature of the self and to reveal the contradictions that lie therein. The reader who endures this contradiction, who reads for the build-up of tension and not for logical progression, is prepared for reading for bliss.

O'Hara's need to depict the self as contradictory is both the product of remembrance and a means of protection. Because "O'Hara works from a self that is mobile, shifting, multiple, contradictory, elusive, and incomplete" (Breslin 268) he is able to use his multiplicity to infuse the text with potential bliss. A centre that shifts constantly produces writing that unravels in complicated ways. The poetry does not always stick together, it seems to prattle.

Barthes describes the prattle of the text as

> . . .merely that foam of language which forms by the effect of a simple need of writing. . . . The writer of this text employs an unweaned language: imperative, automatic, unaffectionate, a minor disaster of static. . . . (4-5).

Indeed, O'Hara's poetry often comes across like mental radio waves that the poet has picked up, bolts of inspiration turned into verse. Prattling could be defined as the poet's need to hear his own voice; a characteristic that seems a part of O'Hara's work. There is the sense in O'Hara's poetry that the poem exists because the poet *needed* to write a poem. The poem is an act of pure inspiration tinged with self indulgence. Prattling adds a tension to the text, however. It contributes to the sense that the poet is most alive in his own work and that he will collapse upon the poem's completion. Again, this triggers thoughts of Lunch Poems and their need to keep the surface of the poem open to whatever comes across the poet's field of vision. Such writing can, however, as Barthes writes "bore me [the reader]". What is needed is a way of turning this boredom into greater erotic tension.

Boredom is subverted when it is made active. The prattling of the text allows the mind of the reader to wander. Reading for *jouissance*, then, is equally concerned with the words on the page and the reader's subjective

response to those words. A text that prattles defines the presence of the author's voice but it also insists upon the author's erasure. As McGraw writes:

> Instead of receiving the text as the object of the message of the authorial persona, the reader goaded into action, can now come into being as subject. By writing his own text, the reader-as-subject can defer the intended meaning of the writer. (947)

The message of "The Death of the Author" resonates here. Yet, it is only through the initial separation of author and reader that *jouissance* becomes possible. The separation of these two figures creates desire. Aided by desire the reader can now reconstruct the text by appreciating the author's potential for both presence and absence. A text that prattles exhibits the potential for both presence and absence, and the reader who confronts this prattle desires the author's figure even as he defers the author's meaning. At once, the reader reads and he re-writes; he becomes a split-subject.

The sheer density of "In Memory of My Feelings," combined with multiple representations of the author's subject, contributes to the nature of the poem's prattle. Part 3 of the poem begins:

> The most arid stretch is often the richest,
> the hand lifting towards a fig tree from hunger
> digging

and there is water, clear, supple, or there
deep in the sand where death sleeps,
a murmurous bubbling
proclaims the blackness that will ease and burn.
You preferred the Arabs? (254)

O'Hara's poetry can feel like an "arid stretch", a relentless barrage of words and images that fails to close into a neat and digestible package for the reader. But as O'Hara writes, this arid stretch is often the richest, offering the reward of pleasure to the understanding reader. By the third part of the poem, its method of operation is already established. The open and constantly shifting landscape allows the reader to transport himself from whatever bits of action he may choose. Because the self of the poet is so very multiple, and because no one representation is favoured over another, the reader is free to disregard what he chooses and to fill in the poem in whatever way he likes. This is how O'Hara utilizes the art of prattle to infuse pleasure into the text: he lulls the reader in order to make the reader an active subject. O'Hara transforms the reader into a figure of equal creative potential.

The figure of the self that O'Hara depicts is filled with multiple possibilities. He is, indeed, a subject of contradiction:

I don't know what blood's

in me I feel like an African prince I am a girl walking
downstairs
in a red pleated dress with heels I am a champion
taking a fall
I am a jockey with a sprained ass-hole I am the light
mist
in which a face appears. . . (256)

As the poet tries on various personalities like costumes at halloween it is impossible to find the real person residing in the poem. Yet, such a shifting of character can create a texture of *jouissance*. As the character shifts and changes, seams develop in the text. Edges between one representation and the next become visible. Barthes tells us that this can be the base of pleasure.

> What pleasure wants is the site of loss, the seam, the cut, the deflation, the dissolve. . . . (7)

The poet's elusive personality combats the reader's quest for static meaning even as it points toward the openness of the written poem. Through the multitude of personal stances we receive glimpses of O'Hara. Yet, these really are only glimpses. O'Hara moves too quickly and changes too suddenly to provide any image of a definable whole.

Such constant shifting, however, creates seams in the text, moments of transition that reveal the poet underneath. Through the varying poses and incarnations of the author the reader is privy to flashes of nakedness, moments when the

poet bares his flesh. The effect of such constant shifting is a metaphoric tear in the author's clothing. Barthes writes that "the most erotic portion of a body [is] where the garment gapes" (9). The erotic quality of the text, Barthes goes on to say, lies in "this flash which seduces, or rather: the staging of an appearance as disappearance" (10). O'Hara's ability to convey both presence and absence simultaneously creates "naked selves", representations that remain fractured, temporary and transparent. The gaps between flashes taunt the reader into desiring the figure of the author even as this figure proves elusive.

In "In Memory of My Feelings," the centre of O'Hara's poetic self is defined as the serpent. Alan Feldman calls this O'Hara's "essential self". This true character of the author "must be preserved despite the passing away of one identity after another" (92). Inside of O'Hara's multiple poses, the serpent remains vital, a recurrent motif throughout the poem. O'Hara introduces the serpent in the opening section of the poem.

> The serpent's eyes
> redden at the sight of those thorny fingernails, he is
> so smooth!
>
> My transparent selves
> flail about like vipers in a pail, writhing and hissing
> without panic, with a certain justice of response
> and presently the aquiline serpent comes to resemble

the Medusa. (CP 253)

The serpent comes to represent the base from which all identities grow, and the base that will remain when its multiplicity fades. In a way, the appearance of the serpent resembles a flash of O'Hara's naked skin. By its presence it renders all of O'Hara's other poses as artificial, as masks that cover the real face.

Each time the serpent is re-introduced into the poem, the poet reveals himself, he exposes the gaping in the garment, the tearing in the text. In the fifth and final section of the poem O'Hara writes

> When you turn your head
> can you feel your heels, undulating? that's what it is
> to be a serpent. I haven't told you of the most
> beautiful things
> in my lives, and watching the ripple of their loss
> disappear
> along the shore. . . . (256)

The moments of loss can be the most beautiful moments, O'Hara tells us. The serpent and the significance of its moulted skin reveals the constant passing that the self must endure. Such passing can provide bliss, however, as it exposes the edge between identities. "In Memory of My Feelings" does not clearly reveal the poet baring his emotional secrets. Instead, it offers flashes of human flesh, glimpses of the man/serpent behind the masks. Such

flashes prove seductive, they beg the reader to approach the text, to enter it, to search for the author.

The reader desires the author in this way because the figure seems both so immediately present and so unknowable. Each appearance of the author is really a staged disappearance, a tease, a flash in the text. One of the most seductive ways that O'Hara teases is in his recording of personal details, minute particulars that point toward the poet's character even if they do not reveal anything more than the poet's active involvement in writing the text. In the previous chapter, an examination of "The Day Lady Died" revealed that a build up of personal references creates a space that opens itself for the reader's appropriation. When we combine the author's flashes of self with the appropriative powers of the reader a unique double portrait appears. In her novel The Prowler, Kristjana Gunnars describes what this portrait might be like:

> I conceived of another sort of self-portrait: the painter paints her own image, but paints it directly on the mirror. The viewer sees not the image of the artist, but his own face through the lines of oil paint. (111)

This type of portrait exposes the duality of the text as it mixes the images of the author and the reader. The text becomes a site of shared expression; a co-operative effort.

"In Memory of My Feelings" creates this type of

portrait by establishing the contours of the poet's self through its personal expression, while allowing for the reader's subjective response to colour in the text. In order for the text to make itself open to the reader's expressive presence, it must use language in a paradoxical way. As Barthes asks: "How can a text which consist of language, be outside languages?" (30). This question remains vital because Barthes realizes that as soon as an author "names", he himself becomes named. In other words, as soon as the author expresses his own vision, that author becomes solidified in the text. What pleasure needs is a more elusive author, an author whose figure is slippery.

One method that the writer may use to define his slippery self is to fill the text with contradiction. A text that revels in paradox "destroys utterly. . . its own discursive category" (30). O'Hara's use of self-contradiction works to open the text up to the reader who wishes to fill in the spaces. O'Hara has discovered another way of opening the text. He names without explaining. In "The Day Lady Died," proper names are exposed but O'Hara's relationship to these names is not. In "In Memory of My Feelings", O'Hara unveils similar moments. In part four of the poem, O'Hara tells us about "Jane" at age seven. He does not, however, tell us why she is important. Her figure becomes nearly an extension of his own. Later in this section of the poem, O'Hara slips the name "Grace" into the

text so effortlessly that it is hard to know, in fact, whether he is speaking of a woman or a type of freedom.

O'Hara's refusal to expand upon the representations of the self that he does deliver mirrors his refusal to divulge any information that might state the importance of these proper nouns. In both cases, the reader feels that the author is on the brink of a personal and enlightening self-revelation, but in both cases, the author falls short of delivering a message of transcendence. O'Hara ends the poem by saying

> and I have lost what is always and everywhere present, the scene of my selves, the occasions of these ruses,
> which I myself and singly must now kill
> and save the serpent in their midst.

While O'Hara tells us that the serpent will now remain alone, devoid of its extended identities, it is clear that the author is mistaken. No matter how many identities the poet may slay, a new one will always appear to take its place. This is the nature of textual transaction. With the completed poem the author might feel that he has shed all of his identities, but the poem holds inscribed all of the variations for the reader to activate. Neither the poet nor the reader is able to escape the poet's personality and the moments of unique personal vision that are captured in the poem. The reader may be unable to resuscitate the author

completely, but the desire of the reader implies that the personality of the author will be re-drawn. The studied incompetence of the narrative line dissipates the importance of language and keeps the author transparent and the reader vital. When the reader comes to the text he observes the thin lines of the author's portrait. The reader then sees how he must add texture to the portrait, he must add his own subjectivity to the art.

The notion of a half completed portrait is seductive in the way it "cruises" the reader, the way it makes the reader come to the text, the way it expresses its need for the reader. O'Hara's use of contradiction and prattle, his highlighting of the erotic seam and his construction of empty language, all bring the reader to the edge of textual desire. Contradiction initially establishes the author as a composite of presence and absence which teases the reader into searching for the figure of the author. The prattle of the text further emphasizes the author's presence because it represents the author's need to write. Yet, prattle also adds a new layer of tension to the text. This endless talking bores the reader and forces the reader to consider his own figure and his own relation to the text. Because the text prattles, the reader begins to envision his own role in the construction of the text. The breaks in the text, the erotic seams, invite the reader into the text in a new way. The flashes of the author's nakedness further

define the author's simultaneous presence and absence, but these flashes also reinforce the reader's capacity for these same qualities. The reader may desire the figure of the author, but all that is offered is brief flashes of exposure. In these revealing moments, the reader realizes that the author inhabits the text but that the text is not whole. In order for the text to be complete, the reader must join the author at this site. Like the author, the reader must straddle the line between appropriation and loss. The reader must enter into the seams of the text. Finally, the use of blank language - "the place where the death of language is glimpsed" (6) - insists that the reader engages himself actively in the construction of the final product. The language insists that the reader colour the text with his own personal subjectivity. The textual product becomes a portrait comprised of the mixed features of the reader and the author.

The text adopts a new language. This language is not the enunciation of the author's intention, instead it is a language that aims to "cruise" the reader. It is language embedded in the text that only a reader searching for textual pleasure may unveil. Christopher Norris, writing of this textual coding, states:

> The text of *jouissance*, as Barthes most succinctly puts it, is a "fetish which desires me". This is done by a whole repertoire of hints, allusions, feints, and

> deceptive gestures toward meaning. The reader is always caught up in the search for an author whom he desires to reconstruct, but whose teasing absence baffles the attempt. (32)

The author's continual absence establishes the tension that is necessary for bliss, but the true consummation, the final ecstasy of the text can only arrive with the reader longing to replicate the text; to unleash the tension in an active and creative way. Barthes writes that "bliss may come only with the absolutely new. . .". The reader's re-writing of a new text defines the arrival of bliss.

O'Hara writes sexy poems. This is not to say that his poems contain erotic subject matter but rather that his poetry cruises the reader into the poem and opens the possibility of creative pleasure - it flaunts the bliss of art. In "Personism", O'Hara compares writing poetry to buying a pair of pants -

> . . . if you're going to buy a pair of pants you want them to be tight enough so that everyone will want to go to bed with you. There's nothing metaphysical about it. (CP 498)

O'Hara's poetry cruises the reader not only because the author straddles the lines between presence and absence,but also because the writing, in its expression of spontaneity and personality, seems so effortlessly simple.

John Bernard Myers, in his book The Poets of the New

York School, writes that "Beyond the writing, beyond the poem, was O'Hara's passion for wanting others, everyone he knew, to share his capacity to 'see'" (20). O'Hara's poetry remains highly seductive because it proposes that anyone, anything, any moment, can provide artistic material. His evident use of contradiction and prattle, take the magic out of poetry writing. O'Hara's poetry continually asserts that any event, any thought, any moment can offer forth poetic material. It is poetry that is both liberating and seductive. Laurent Jenny writes that automatic writing is seductive because

> [a]nyone can apply the technique: passivity, speed, tips to avoid stalling. . . so that this "magical art" of discourse is also the most profane, the most reproducible. . . . (107)

O'Hara might struggle against passivity, he might adopt the pose of the poet in a great many of his poems, yet his work continually asserts that anything can be the subject of poetry: ". . .how can you really care if anybody gets it, or gets what it means. . .", O'Hara writes in "Personism". O'Hara's poetry, like his poetic theory, makes the endeavour seem simple. And this simplicity can seem amazingly seductive.

Music critic Lester Bangs - discussing his own passion for a record - best describes how art that highlights its own simplicity can "cruise" the reader in this way:

> I realize that any[one] with the equipment could have made this album, including me, you or Lou. That's one of the main reasons I like it so much. . . . not only does it bring you closer to the artist, but someday, god willing I may get down to do my own. . . .(195)

When the reader considers his own potential for creativity, his involvement in the text becomes paramount. The reader becomes meshed with the author because he is at once thinking of the author's endeavour as he considers his own. A state of creative tension exists in the moment when the reader's creative potential mirrors the author's.

In "In Memory of My Feelings", as in so much of O'Hara's poetry, the creative endeavour, the writing of poetry, is established as the highest pleasure. It springs from desire, and it is unleashed "against [the poet's] will/ against [the poet's] love" (CP 257) until it becomes art. The poem stands as the monument of being and not being: a text that springs from desire and once written becomes a text that desires the reader.

In O'Hara's poetry the author is not dead, but in writing the text he must experience loss so that his text may become a place of union. John D. Kirkland Jr. writes that

> Reading is not easy, innocent, or simple. Reading is hard, dangerous, and strange. It is hard because the reader must bring the totality of his being to the

> text, and then displace it, for the particularity of the text. . . . (724)

O'Hara's poetry is not easy to read, but when it is embraced as a text of *jouissance* it offers the reader new pleasures. The textual challenge of O'Hara's poetry is to find both the author and his absence in the poetry. The challenge for the reader of O'Hara's work is to displace not the totality of his being, but only part. The author is neither appropriated nor celebrated, he remains the fractured subject of his own work. And the reader, by appreciating this fractured subject, is able to experience vicariously what the figure of the author represents - simultaneous presence and absence - performance on the edge of loss.

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